

Reflections on Death and Grieving

Brandon Pierce

Much of what I'm going to write here I've already said in one way or another in classes, sermons, and casual conversations with many of you. That being said, I think there is some value in reflecting on death and grieving in the wake of Tamarie's passing.

I want to begin by thinking briefly about the nature of death in a Christian frame of mind. We use many metaphors to speak about death. I already mentioned one, where death is a "passing away" ostensibly into another realm or place. We also often speak about death as a person's time—usually in reference to older persons who are "ready to go." But the Scriptures give us another vital metaphor for death that is important. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 says

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

So Paul describes those who have died as those who have fallen asleep (literally "the sleeping ones"), with the rejoinder that they will be brought to the presence of God. The metaphor of sleep is a metaphor of rest, reminiscent of Jesus's call for those who are weary to come to him for he will give them rest (Matthew 11:28-30). In a similar vein, through a series of arguments about the resurrection of the body in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul describes the resurrected body as something "perishable" that must put on the "imperishable" body of the resurrection.

⁵¹ Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

Both of these metaphors—falling asleep and putting on the imperishable—are ways of describing the redemption of our bodies and our lives when our deaths are placed in the faithful hands of God. One need not have a body riddled with cancer or weakened by old age to have a sense of longing for the beauty and vitality and eternity for which we were made. And although we ought not to disregard the gift that is mortal existence, we can still remain hopeful for the end for which we were made on the other side of eternity.

I think that is a helpful way of thinking about our mortality as human beings. But there is a difference between having that frame of mind and the actual ways in which death affects us as human beings. And so there is a need to speak to the pastoral aspect of death, dying, and grieving.

My first thought on the matter is that we do not need to manipulate our feelings with pious half-truths when we experience the death of a loved one. Honesty is key in grief. There is a myth floating around that we cannot doubt God or be angry at him or that if we were truly faithful

Christians then we would be celebrating when a loved one dies. None of that is true. If you get a chance you really ought to read the book of Job—not just the first two and last chapter where all the action is, but the really long, poetic middle part which consists of a long debate between Job, God, and Job’s friends. In this section Job is in a dark place and he does not mince words about the fact that he feels that God has been an unjust God in regards to the devastation he [Job] has endured. Job is honest; brutally honest, while his friends are constantly on the ropes trying to defend God and insist that Job must have done something wrong to deserve this plight. At the end it is Job, not the friends, who is vindicated. Or think of the many Psalms of Lament like Psalm 6 or Psalm 42 or the most despairing Psalm 88 in which not a trickle of hope is mentioned. Or think of Lamentations. Many of these texts are echoed in the Gospels and other New Testament texts.

The fact of the matter is that there is something profoundly faithful about doubt precisely because it insists that God must be God, not letting him off the hook, and places all of our deepest, truest, rawest emotions in his hands. So when we experience things like the tragic and premature death of an extraordinary young man like Tamarie we are allowed to hurt, to be confused, or angry, or doubtful, knowing that these will lead us further into the life of God and reveal the faithfulness of God to us in ever more meaningful ways.

The second thought is how we treat one another in our grief. Here I want to be as practical as I can. Pithy aphorisms like “God just needed another angel in heaven” or “they’re in a better place” often do more harm than good in the long run. They can be comforting in a sense or for a time, but eventually they will only make the pain worse. If at all possible do not seek to be the wise man/woman who can make things better with a word or phrase. Instead, listen, be honest, admit that we do not know why some things happen.

Another idea that grieving parents often find helpful is to tell stories about their child who has passed. It helps them know that their child was loved, that their life was significant and meaningful, and it helps the parents themselves remember their child.

Most importantly, be present to people in grief as much as possible. Your “presence” does not have to be literal. Phone calls, notes, emails, and text messages are all acceptable forms of being present. If possible, though, be literally present. Show up to their house with good food or some other token (call first if you’re unsure). Be with them and remind them of the goodness and love and value of the life for the living.